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## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT for 2012**

**Presented to the Annual General Meeting 13 February 2013**

It gives me pleasure to report on behalf of the Council for 2012.

### **Looking backwards and forward**

This year we are celebrating Canberra's centenary. It will be a reminder to us all of the distance our city has come and the part Canberra has played in establishing Australia's national identity.

The contribution of community groups in forming Canberra is being widely recognised, the thousands of groups and individuals which have added to the civilised progress of our city and country. The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is one such group of people. It has existed in Canberra for over 50 years - making it one of the capital city's oldest civil society, non-governmental organisations.

Life in our city and country has undergone radical change over the years, such that it is now hardly recognisable from earlier days. One of the most dramatic has impacted on our RCS almost disproportionately, namely the realignment of national loyalties and political obligations away from a predominantly Anglo-centric focus to embracing a more multilateral, global context.

With its origins in the ubiquitous British Empire the RCS functioned very much over a number of years essentially as social 'club', reinforced and encouraged by ties of kith and kin and the bonds of wartime experiences. We all know that can no longer be the case in our modern Australian world, although there will be aspects of our activities that draw on the honourable and well established traditional and inherited values.

The modern Commonwealth is an association of 54 governments which act together to improve the lot of its member states and the wider global community.

Our place is found in the Commonwealth's enabling of its non-governmental, civil society, organisations. These represent the 'peoples Commonwealth' operating to cement ties of friendship and fellowship within the Commonwealth association and, over the years, pledging themselves to develop agendas consistent with Commonwealth priorities of peace between nations, progress and wellbeing, and justice and good governance in democratic societies. As late as the Perth CHOGM in late 2011 leaders pledged to promote the association through the strong and important voice of the 'peoples Commonwealth'.

As we celebrate this great landmark in Canberra's story we should also be thankful to those in the RCS who have over the years ensured the continuance of the Society through all these changes - and to commit ourselves and our resources to keeping their vision alive and relevant into the future.

### **2012 in retrospect**

The past year has been one of modest achievement. A number of positives come out of the year, meaning that overall we continue to build on a number of our strengths.

We have implemented a programme that emphasises the key elements in our stated objectives. These have included social activities such as four seasonal lunches, educational activities such as briefings at various High Commissions, and landmark events such the annual Commonwealth Dinner in March and, in June, a Dinner jointly hosted with the Australian Britain Society celebrating HM The Queen's Silver Jubilee. In collaboration with our affiliate Commonwealth bodies in Canberra we have conducted several

seminars on topical issues (with the CRTA) and they have seen a successful annual Commonwealth Day Celebration (with the CDCC) in March attended by HE The Governor General.

Of special note during the year was a generous bequest from the late Mrs Phyllis Montgomery OAM. The Council is still deliberating on how the funds might best be put to use observing the terms of the will and will inform the membership when a decision has been made. In the meantime we salute Phyllis' memory as a past President and a generous benefactor of the RCS and its work.

We have faced a number of challenges over the past year, neither of them new.

Like all civil service organisations we are experiencing a decline in numbers, aging membership and as a result less resources, human and financial. Another derives from a basic disinterest in the Commonwealth brand. This applies both to the government and to the general populace. Both contribute to a vicious cycle and a sense of mostly treading water despite increased efforts.

In one key area we were not successful, again despite our best endeavours. For the second year in a row we have had to cancel our Schools Public Speaking Competition. This has been a source of great disappointment but we are already discussing a better way of approaching this project in 2013.

Another disappointment has been in what appears to have been the virtual collapse of the world-wide use of the concept of *Friends of the Commonwealth*. We have resolved however to continue to use this concept here in Canberra as a means of consolidating a coalition of interests, talent and partnerships that might be influential in furthering the work of the Commonwealth.

### **The year ahead in 2013**

This year we need to show more focus, determination and rigour in what we do.

As mentioned, we have not been without success in the past and I believe this is one benefit in maintaining modest, achievable aims for the Society particularly going through lean times. And here I want to thank you all for your support in the past year and in particular to Council members for all their work,

I propose that at its first meeting Council considers adopting a five point agenda for 2013, that as *Friends of the Commonwealth* in Canberra building on our foundational strengths as follows:

1. **Building on our good solid core membership**, especially looking to attract among young professionals.
2. **Building on the structural strength of our three-fold entities** under the banner of the Commonwealth in Canberra: the RCS based on the traditional values of the RCS world-wide family of friendship, education and advocacy; the Round Table (CRTA) facilitating learning and education about the Commonwealth; and the CDCC, Commonwealth Day helps us to respect the diversity of the Commonwealth its multi-faith, multicultural character, building tolerance, respect and understanding.
3. **Building upon a renewed financial security afforded by the Montgomery bequest**
4. **We try again with youth Speaking Competition and Essay Competition**
5. **We strengthen our relations with other Commonwealth bodies/agencies in Canberra**, particularly High Commissions.

*Hugh Craft*

President

13 February 2013